



Original dust cover for *Silent Spring*, credit USFWS

As a nature writer, biologist and some say the founder of the modern environmental movement, Rachel Carson has had an impact on our lives. Through her book Silent Spring, she made people think about the chemicals they used in and around their homes and those chemicals' potential hazards to our planet. The following quote from her in 1954 still applies today, "*The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction.*" On May 27, 2007, there will be centennial celebrations of Rachel Carson's birth.

Rachel Louise Carson was born in a "small five room farmhouse in the rural river town of Springdale, Pennsylvania on May 27, 1907.¹" She was the youngest of three, with a sister, Marian and brother, Robert. It is said as a young child she received her love of nature from her mother, Maria McLean Carson, who spent many hours with Rachel while her other children were at school. Her mother was a teacher until she married Rachel's father. Married women were not allowed to teach school in those days.²

Rachel loved to write and was first published at age 10 in the St. Nicholas Magazine for children. She graduated high school in 1925, first in her class.² She continued her love of writing by entering the Pennsylvania College for Women (now Chatham College, Pittsburgh) as an English major. It was not until her junior year, when she took a required course in biology, that her love of nature resurfaced. She changed her major to zoology and graduated magna cum laude in 1929.¹

Rachel received her MA from John Hopkins in 1932. She taught zoology at the University of Maryland and continued her studies in the summers at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts at Cape Cod. After her father's sudden death in 1935 and her sister's death in 1936 she took on family financial responsibilities and with the help of her mother raised her sister's two orphaned children.³ She never finished her doctorate.

She became the first woman to take and pass the civil service test and the Bureau of Fisheries (now U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) hired her as a full-time junior biologist in 1936. She became Editor-in-Chief of all publications for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1949.⁴ She retired in 1952 to write full time and that summer she bought land and built a cottage on the Sheepscot River near West Southport on the coast of Maine, where she and her mother had visited since 1946.⁴

Rachel Carson wrote four books while she was alive: Under the Sea-Wind (1941); The Sea Around Us (1951); The Edge of the Sea (1955); Silent Spring (1962). A fifth book A Sense of Wonder was published in 1965, posthumously, from a 1950's magazine article titled "Help Your Child to Wonder."¹

It could be said that the most controversial time in her life was when she spoke against the indiscriminate use of herbicides and pesticides by the chemical industries. The public felt safe that the government would not let anything be released into their world which would cause harm. The concerns she raised made people think that maybe there could be a down side to the use of these man-made chemicals, not found in nature, not biodegradable. She introduced the term "ecosystem" to the public⁵ and suggested nature's balance as an alternative to quick fix, short term chemical solutions.

Rachel Carson died April 14, 1964 from breast cancer, possibly caused by the very chemicals about which she tried to warn the world. She left her love of writing and nature with us and the warning to be aware of what we do to our planet. As a species, we still do not understand the balance of nature and need to continue to work towards a healthier world.

You will be glad to know that The Rachel Carson Homestead, listed as a National Historic Landmark, has an organic “Sense of Wonder” garden using native plants in a suburban setting, is handicap accessible and open year round. Visit their web site for more details. (<http://www.rachelcarsonhomestead.org/>)

The Rachel Carson Council Resource Center has an excellent web site for multimedia information concerning your gardening practices and the use of chemicals in your environment. (<http://members.aol.com/rccouncil/ourpage/catalog.htm#nature>)

There are many places which honor Rachel Carson in the United States. In North Carolina we have at least two. Since May 2002 there has been a sculpture and educational wildlife garden honoring Rachel Carson at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences in Raleigh. ⁶ This quote from Rachel Carson can be found there "I sincerely believe that for the child . . . it is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow."⁷

There is also the beautiful Rachel Carson National Estuarine Research Reserve ⁸ near Beaufort, NC, where you can go by boat to explore the wonders of nature and the sea around us.

References:

- ¹ Online resource of Rachel Carson at <http://www.rachelcarson.org/>
- ² Online resource of Washington Post article on Rachel Carson
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/books/chap1/rachelcarson.htm>
- ³ Online resource from PBS Science Odyssey for People and Discoveries
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aso/databank/entries/btcars.html>
- ⁴ Online resource from Time Magazine's Top 100 People of the Twentieth Century
<http://www.time.com/time/time100/scientist/profile/carson.html>
- ⁵ Online resource from the Ecology Hall of Fame
<http://www.ecotopia.org/ehof/carson/index.html>
- ⁶ Online resource from ABB in the United States
<http://www.abb.us/cawp/seitp202/85256A8C004C110785256BB8007012CB.aspx>
- ⁷ Online resource from the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences
<http://naturalsciences.org/education/index.html>
- ⁸ Online resource from the North Carolina National Estuarine Research Reserve
http://www.ncnerr.org/pubsiteinfo/siteinfo/rachelcarson/rachel_carson.html

Dan Chambers is a member of the Triad Chapter of NCNPS. He is also an active member of the T. Gilbert Pearson Chapter of the Audubon Society.

What can you do in honor of Rachel Carson?

- Go outside and explore the wonders of our natural world at a National Wildlife Refuge, a local park or even your own backyard.
- Volunteer with a local conservation organization to help conserve wildlife habitat.
- Read one of Carson's books and pass the conservation message along to a friend or family member.
- Explore a career in natural resources or wildlife conservation.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is creating resources and tools to help build on Rachel Carson's legacy and instill a sense of environmental stewardship in a new generation of conservationists.

For more information, please visit <http://www.fws.gov/rachelcarson>